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THE 'FURROW' IN KEATS' *ODE TO AUTUMN*

In the second stanza of his *Ode to Autumn* Keats represents Autumn as a sleeping reaper:

Or on a half-reap'd furrow sound asleep,
Drows'd with the fume of poppies, while thy hook
Spares the next swath and all its twinéd flowers.

One who looks closely at this attractive picture is likely to be puzzled by the word 'furrow', and to ask how there can be furrows in a field where grain is being cut. The furrows of ploughing must have been effaced by the harrowing that precedes sowing, so that a ripened crop and furrows can hardly exist at the same time. Moreover, how can Autumn sleep 'on' a furrow? A furrow is the ditch made by a plow, and may be slept *in* but not *on*.

Can some other interpretation for 'furrow' be found? The poetry of Keats furnishes no other instance of the noun, but 'furrow'd' occurs three times in *Endymion* (3.223, 448, 961), and 'furrowing' in *Otho the Great* (4.2.83). In the first passage the word plainly has its usual meaning:

His snow-white brows
Went arching up, and like two magic ploughs
Furrow'd deep wrinkles in his forehead large.

The others are similar, though less definite.

Turning to the *New English Dictionary*, one finds that *furrow* is in poetry 'used *loosely* for arable land, a piece of ploughed land, the cornfields.' In the following examples, three of them given by the *Dictionary*, this meaning appears. Shakespeare writes:

You sun-burn'd sicklemen, of August weary,
Come hither from the furrow, and be merry.¹

Because of the juxtaposition of the words 'sicklemen' and 'furrow', one feels as though Keats might be echoing this very

¹ *Tempest* 4. 1. 134-5.

passage. The dramatist also brings together 'furrow-weeds' and a grown crop:

Cordelia. Alack! 'tis he: . . .
Crown'd with rank fumiter and furrow-weeds, . . .
Darnel, and all the idle weeds that grow
In our sustaining corn. A century send forth;
Search every acre in the high-grown field.²

An example of peculiar interest to a student of Keats is from Chapman's *Iliad*:

There grew by this a field of corn, high, ripe, where reapers wrought,
And let thick handfuls fall to earth, for which some other brought
Bands, and made sheaves. Three binders stood, and took the handfuls
reap'd
From boys that gather'd quickly up, and by them armfuls heap'd.
Amongst these at a furrow's end, the king stood pleased at heart.³

One of the examples given by the *Dictionary of furrow* as meaning *cornfield* is from Milton:

The labour'd ox
In his loose traces from the furrow came.⁴

But it seems as though this may also be taken in the primary sense of 'a narrow trench in the earth made by a plow'; Miss Lockwood so interprets it in her *Lexicon to Milton*. Another loose poetical use of the word occurs in Pope:

He [the patriarch] from the wond'ring furrow called the food.⁵

In 1735 William Somerville wrote, in describing a hunt:

See how they thread
The Brakes, and up yon Furrow drive along.⁶

Somerville is writing of Autumn, and makes the word 'furrow' mean a cultivated field. After the time of Keats, Tennyson wrote:

The lamb rejoiceth in the year,
And raceth freely with his fere,

²*King Lear* 4. 4. 1-7.

³*Iliad* 18.550-7. The word which Chapman renders 'furrow' also has the meaning of *swath*. I owe this reference to the kindness of Professor Leslie N. Broughton, one of the editors of the Concordance to Keats.

⁴*Comus* 291-2.

⁵*Essay on Man* 3.219.

⁶*Chase* 2.130.

And answers to his mother's calls
From the flower'd furrow.⁷

He seems to mean not arable land, but pasture. Lastly, a book dealing with the agricultural laborer, by Christopher Holdenby, published in 1913, is called *Folk of the Furrow*.

In the preceding examples, as in Keats, 'furrow' is singular. There is also a group of passages in which the word is used in the plural, and furrows are associated with grain or stubble. Ariosto describes how a fire, burning the dry stubble, 'scorre per gli solchi,'⁸ and in telling of a flood represents it as destroying

E i grassi solchi e le biade feconde.⁹

These and their context are rendered by Hoole as follows:

In the open fields, or sunny meads,
The brittle stubble and the spiky reeds
Resist but little, when the wary hind
Kindles the flame, to which the northern wind
Gives double force, till wide around it preys
And all the furrows crackle in the blaze.

When the king of floods, with deepening roar,
In sudden deluge bursts his sounding shore;
Wide o'er the field his rushing tide is borne,
The furrows drowns and sweeps the ripen'd corn.

Spenser, whom Keats often imitated, copies Ariosto as follows:

As he that strives to stop a suddein flood,
And in strong banckes his violence enclose,
Forceth it swell above his wonted mood,
And largely overflow the fruitfull plaine,
That all the countrey seemes to be a Maine,
And the rich furrowes flote, all quite fordonne:
The woefull husbandman doth lowd complaine,
To see his whole yeares labour lost so soone,
For which to God he made so many an idle boone.¹⁰

⁷ *Supposed Confessions of a Second-Rate Sensitive Mind* 158–60. It seems as though this might properly be given in *N.E.D.*

⁸ *Orlando Furioso* 14.48.6

⁹ *Ib.*, 40.31.4. The use of the word in Hoole and Ariosto was brought to my notice by my pupil Miss Clara Crane. Sir Sidney Colvin states that Keats as studying Ariosto about the time when he composed *To Autumn* (*John Keats*, New York, 1917, p. 370).

¹⁰ *Faerie Queene* 3.7.34.

Perhaps the ultimate source for the figurative use of the word *furrow* in modern poets is Virgil, who so employs *sulcus* as to suggest the meaning of *cultivated fields*. In one instance he associates ripened seed and furrows:

Grandia saepe quibus mandavimus hordea sulcis,
Infelix loldium et steriles nascuntur avenae.¹¹

Another example somewhat suggests Keats' picture:

Nec requies, quin aut pomis exuberet annus,
Aut fetu pecorum, aut Cerealis mergite culmi,
Proventuque oneret sulcos atque horrea vincat.¹²

Here we have a reference to granaries, and, both in the lines quoted and in their context, something of personification of the seasons. However, it should be remembered that Roman methods of agriculture were such that Virgil's words when written probably appeared less figurative than they do to a modern reader.¹³

There is, then, no lack of precedent for making Keats' 'furrow' a grainfield. Moreover, the interpretation finds support in the variants recorded in the Oxford edition of Keats by Mr. H. Buxton Forman. The reading of the Holograph is as follows:

Or sound asleep in a half reaped field
Dozed with red poppies while thy reaping hook
Spares for some slumbrous minutes the next swath.

But still the preposition gives trouble. Keats uses 'in' with 'field'; if he had intended 'furrow' to mean *field* would he have changed the preposition to 'on' ('on a half-reaped furrow')?

¹¹ *Ecl.* 5. 36-7.

¹² *Georg.* 2. 516-18. Perhaps the following is of the same nature:

et sulcis frumenti quaereret herbam (*Georg.* 1.134).

Conington, however, comments on the line: "'Sulcis' seems to mean not *in* but *by* furrows. 'Might get corn by ploughing.'" If his interpretation is correct, ripened corn and furrows are not associated here; but is it impossible that 'sulcis' is used here, as in the passages quoted above, to mean cultivated fields? Virgil also uses the word, with a meaning perhaps not purely literal, in the singular:

Quis . . . tacitum . . . relinquat . . .
te sulco, Serrane, serentem (*Aen.* 6.841-4)?

For plural forms see *Georg.* 1. 216, 223.

¹³ Adam Dickson, *The Husbandry of the Ancients*, chaps. 21-4.

The copy in the British Museum supplies a variant for the two lines immediately following the one especially in question:

Dozéd with a fume of poppies, while thy hook
Spares the next sheath and all its honied flowers.

'Sheath' is evidently a mistake for *sheaf*. This reading has no necessary effect on the preceding line; yet, if it had stood, 'furrow' could have been thought a mistake for *swath*; but, in the time of Keats, grain, when cut with the hook, was not left lying in the swath. And while it may be possible to sleep *on* a swath, in the sense of a line or ridge of cut grain, the word 'half-reaped' shows that the substituted *swath* must mean the path cleared by the reaper in one course along the field. This, again, would be slept *in* and not *on*.¹⁴ In addition, one sleeping in a half-reaped swath would spare the remainder of that swath rather than the next one. 'Swath' in the finished version more probably means the breadth of grain cut by a single stroke of the reaping-hook. But the word is better fitted to describe the long sweep of a scythe. However, one style of reaping-hook, the scythe-hook, somewhat used in the time of Keats, did make a true swath about two feet wide. In using the sickle-hook, the common style of reaping instrument, the reaper seized stalks of grain in his left hand, cut them off, and laid them on the ground on the band to be used in binding them, until he had enough for a sheaf. He then either bound it himself, or left it for the bandster, who followed him.¹⁵

The poem depends in part, at least, on actual observation. Keats tells of its composition in a letter dated September 22, 1819:

I never liked stubble-fields so much as now—aye, better than the chilly green of the Spring. Somehow, a stubble field looks warm, in the same way that some pictures look warm. This struck me so much in my Sunday's walk that I composed upon it.¹⁶

¹⁴ It perhaps should be mentioned that there is a slight possibility of some confusion with the *ridge*, or space between two dead-furrows (inter-furrows) left in the field for the sake of drainage. This ridge is often mentioned in writers on agriculture. The dead-furrows, of course, remain until after harvest.

¹⁵ J. C. Loudon, *Encyclopedia of Agriculture*, London, 1883 (preface dated 1831) p. 515. I have never seen grain cut with anything simpler than a cradle.

¹⁶ *The Works of John Keats*, ed. H. Buxton Forman, London, 1883, Vol. 3, p. 329.

Yet this particular observation was made on Sunday, when work probably would not be going on, and, apparently, the grain had already been removed from the stubble-field. Even though 'Keats had known the country from boyhood,'¹⁷ there seems to be little reason to suppose that he became especially familiar with agriculture. The difficulties of this particular passage lead one to suspect that the poet's search for agricultural terms was a groping one, and that he chose among those that came to hand without a perfectly clear understanding of them.

If the lines be in truth as difficult as they appear to me, the passage may be taken to illustrate both the weakness and the strength of Keats. He is likely not to show that full mastery of the meaning of words that marks the greatest poets, and his vocabulary seems sometimes insufficient to furnish him with the word proper for both thought and meter. Yet he is here perhaps revealing his powers of appreciation and assimilation by adapting a word from a suitable passage in Shakespeare, though one hesitates to say that he has fully assimilated what he took, or bettered it in the borrowing. Nevertheless, the sound of the line is effective. It was a stroke of genius in the management of rhythm, if not in the management of ideas, to substitute the verse as it now stands for the reading of the Holograph. And though the indistinct outlines of the passage do not permit us to think it a work of the highest and best disciplined genius, the picture is beautiful in spite of its inaccurate drawing.

ALLAN H. GILBERT.

*The Rice Institute,
Houston, Texas.*

¹⁷ *The Poems of John Keats*, with an Introduction by E. de Sélincourt, New York, 1905, p. lxiii.